

Crooked Trails and Straight

By
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ACTION! ACTION! ACTION!

Here's a story with action, action, action. "Out where the West begins" is still the land of romance, and this is the heart of the old-fashioned West in the days of the cowboy, the cattle rustler, the horse-thief, the outlaw, the express robber, the sheriff's posse, the bloody and thrilling battles with the six-gun. There are some human and lovable people in whose fortunes we are interested, and some "bad men" who very properly die with their boots on. Quite a plot there is, too. But action, action, action—the story moves with a rush.

PART I

Curly.

CHAPTER I.

Following a Crooked Trail.

Across Dry valley a dust cloud had been moving for hours. It rolled into Saguache at the brisk heels of a bunch of horses just about the time the town was settling itself to supper. From out of the heart of it cantered a rider, who swung his pony as on a half dollar, and deflected the remuda toward Chunn's corral.

The rider was in the broad-rimmed felt hat, the gray shirt, the plain leather chaps of a vaquero. Under other conditions he might have been a college freshman for age, but the competent confidence of manhood sat easily on his broad shoulders. Curly Flandrau had more than once looked into the chill eyes of death.

The leaders of the herd dribbled into the corral through the open gate, and the others crowded on their heels. Three more riders followed Curly into the inclosure. One of them, a red-haired young fellow of about the same age as Curly, swung stiffly from the saddle.

"Me for a square meal first off," he gave out promptly.

"Not till we've finished this business, Mac. We'll put a deal right through if Warren's here," decided a third member of the party. He was a tough-looking customer of nearly fifty. "Bad Bill" Cranston he was called, and the man looked as if he had earned his sobriquet.

"And what if he ain't here?" snarled Lute Blackwell. "Are you aiming to sit down and wait for him?"

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it," Bad Bill answered. "Curly, want to ride up to the hotel and ask if Mr. Dave Warren is there? Bring him right down if he is."

The young man cantered up the dusty street toward the hotel.

"Thought you'd fixed it with this Warren to be right on the spot so's we could unload on him prompt," Blackwell grumbled at Cranston without looking toward the latter.

"I didn't promise he'd be hanging round your neck soon as you hit town," Cranston retorted coolly.

The owner of the corral sauntered from the stable and glanced over the bunch of horses milling around.

"Drive all the way from Bar Double M?" asked the keeper, his eyes on the brand stamped on the flank of a pony circling past.

"Yep."

Bad Bill turned away and began to unsaddle.

"Looks like you been hitting the road at a right lively gait."

Mac cut in. "Shoulder of my prone's ebbed from the saddle. Got anything that'll heal it?"

"You bet I have." The man hurried into the stable and the red-headed cowpuncher winked across the back of his horse at Bill.

The keeper of the stable and the young man were still busy doctoring the sore when Curly arrived with Warren.

The buyer was a round-bodied man with black gimlet eyes that saw much he never told. The bargain he

drove was a hard one, but it did not take long to come to terms at about one-third the value of the string he was purchasing. Very likely he had his suspicions, but he did not voice them. No doubt they cut a figure in the price. He let it be understood that he was a supply agent for the rebels in Mexico. Before the bills were warm in the pockets of the sellers, his vaqueros were mounted and were moving the remuda toward the border.

Curly and Mac helped them get started. As they rode back to the corral a young man came out from the stable. Flandrau forgot that there were reasons why he wanted just now to be a stranger in the land with his identity not advertised. He let out a shout.

"Oh, you, Slat's Davis!"

"Hello, Curly! How are things a-comin'?"

"Fine. When did you blow in to Saguache? Ain't you off your run some?"

They had ridden the range together and had frolicked around on a dozen boyish larks. To put it mildly the meeting was likely to prove embarrassing.

"Come down to see about getting some cows for the old man from the Fiddleback outfit," Davis explained.

"You riding for the Bar Double M?"

There was a momentary silence. Curly's vigilant eyes met those of his old side partner. What did Slat's know? Were his suspicions already active?

"No, I'm riding for the Map of Texas," Flandrau answered evenly.

"Come on, Curly. Let's go feed our faces," Mac called from the stable.

Flandrau nodded. "You still with the Hashknife?" he asked Davis.

"Still with 'em. I've been raised to assistant foreman."

"Bully for you. That's great. All right, Mac, I'm coming. That's sure great, old boss. Well, see you later, Slat's."

Flandrau followed Mac, dissatisfied with himself for leaving his friend so cavalierly. He guessed Slat's would be hurt, but he had to think of his partners in this enterprise.

After supper they took a room at the hotel and divided the money Warren had paid for the horses. None of them had slept for the last fifty hours and Mac proposed to tumble into bed at once.

Bad Bill shook his head. "I wouldn't, Mac. Let's hit the trail and do our sleeping in the hills. There's too many telephone lines into this town to suit me."

"Sho! Our play isn't to hike out like we were scared stiff of something. What we want to do is to act as if we could look every darned citizen in the face. Mac's sure right," Curly agreed.

"You kids make me tired. I'm going to dust my pronto," Blackwell snarled.

"Sure. Whenever you like. You got to split up anyhow," Mac said.

Bad Bill looked at Blackwell and nodded. "That's right. We don't all want to pull a blue streak. That would be a dead give away. Let the kids stay if they want to."

"So that they can round on us if they're nabbed," Blackwell sneered.

Cranston called him down roughly. "That'll be enough along that line, Lute. I don't stand for any more cracks like it."

Blackwell, not three months out from the penitentiary, faced the other with an ugly look in his eyes. He was always ready to quarrel, but he did not like to fight unless he had a sure thing.

"Didn't mean any harm," the ex-convict growled. "But I don't like this sticking around town."

"Then I wouldn't stay if I were you," Curly suggested promptly. "Mac and I have got a different notion. So we'll tie to Saguache for a day or two."

As soon as the older men had gone the others tumbled into bed and fell asleep at once. Daylight was sifting in through the open window before their eyes opened. Somebody was pounding on the bedroom door.

Mac was already out of bed when his partner's feet hit the floor.

"What's up, Mac?"

The eyes of the redheaded puncher gleamed with excitement. His six-gun was in his hand. By the look of him he was about ready to whang loose through the door.

"Hold your horses, you chump," Curly sang out. "It's the hotel clerk. I left a call with him."

"That you, Curly? For God's sake, let me in."

Before he had got the words out the door was open. Slat's came in and shut it behind him. He looked at Flandrau.

"They're after you," he said.

"Who?" fired Curly back at him.

"The Bar Double M boys. They just reached town."

"Put up that gun, Mac, and move into your clothes immediately," ordered Curly. Then to Davis: "Go on. Unload the rest. What do they know?"

"They inquired for you and your friend here down at the Legal Tender."

"Have we got a chance to make our getaway?" Mac asked.

Davis nodded. "Slide out through the kitchen, cut into the alley, and across lots to the corral. We'll lock the door and I'll hold them here long as I can."

"Good boy, Slat's. If there's a necktie party you'll get the first bid," Curly grinned.

Slat's looked at him, cold and steady. Plainly than words he was telling his former friend that he would not joke with a horse thief. For the sake of old times he would save him if he could, but he would call any bluffs about the whole thing being a lark.

Curly's eyes fell away. It came to him for the first time that he was no longer an honest man. Up till this escapade he had been only wild, but now he had crossed the line that separates decent folks from outlaws.

Not another word was said while they hurried into their clothes. But as Curly passed out of the door he called back huskily. "Won't forget what you done for us, Slat's."

Again their eyes met. Davis did not speak, but the chill look on his face told Flandrau that he had lost a friend.

The two young men ran down the back stairs, passed through the kitchen where a Chinese cook was getting breakfast, and out into the bright sunlight.

"Won't do to be in any hurry. The play is we're gentlemen of leisure, just out for an amble to get the morning air," Curly cautioned.

While they fed, watered and saddled they swapped gossip with the wrangler. It would not do to leave the boy with a story of two riders in such a hurry to hit the trail that they could not wait to feed their bronchos. So they stuck it out while the animals ate. At that, they shaved it fine, for as they rode away two men were coming down the street.

"Kite Bonfil," Curly called to his partner.

No explanation was needed. Bonfil was the foreman of the Bar Double M. He let out a shout as he caught sight of them and began to run forward. Simultaneously his gun seemed to jump from its holster.

Mac's quirt sang and his pony leaped to a canter in two strides. A bullet zipped between them. Another struck the dust at their heels. Faintly there came to the fugitives the sound of the foreman's impotent curses. They had escaped for the time.

Presently they passed the last barb wire fence and open country lay before them. It did not greatly matter which direction they followed, so long as they headed into the desert.

Neither of them had ever been in serious trouble before and both regretted the folly that had turned their drunken spree into a crime. They were stretched in front of the fire that evening trying to make a smoke serve instead of supper. Mac broke a gloomy silence to grunt out jerkily a situation he could no longer keep to himself.

"Here's where I got my walking papers, I reckon. No rustlers need apply."

Curly shot a slant glance at him. "Meaning—the girl?"

The red-headed puncher took from his coat pocket a photograph and showed it to his friend. The sweet clean face of a wholesome girl smiled at Curly.

"She's certainly a right nice young lady. I'll bet she stands by you all right. Where's she live at?"

"Waits in a restaurant at Tombstone. We was going to be married soon as we had saved five hundred dollars." Mac swallowed hard. "And I had to figure out this short cut to the money whilst I was drunk. As if she'd look at money made that way."

Curly tried to cheer him up, but did not make much of a job at it. The indisputable facts were that Mac was an outlaw and a horse thief.

The redheaded boy rolled another cigarette despondently. "Sho! I've

cooked my goose. She'll not look at me—even if they don't send me to the pen. And she's the best ever. Her name's Myra Anderson."

They slept under a live oak with the soundness of healthy youth. For the time they forgot their troubles. Neither of them knew that as the hours slipped away red tragedy was galloping closer to them.

The sun was shining in his face when Curly awakened. He sat up and rubbed his eyes. Mac was nowhere in sight. Probably he had gone to get the horses.

A sound broke the stillness of the desert. Flandrau leaped to his feet, and at the same instant Mac came running over the brow of the hill. A smoking revolver was in his hand.

From behind the hill a gun cracked—then a second—and a third. Mac stumbled over his feet and pitched forward full length on the ground. His friend ran toward him, forgetting the revolver that lay in its holster under the live oak. Every moment he expected to see Mac jump up, but the figure stretched beside the cholla never moved. Flandrau felt the muscles round his heart tighten. He had seen sudden death before, but never had it come so near home.

A bullet sent up a spurt of dust in front of him, another just on the left. Riders were making a half circle around the knoll and closing in on him. In his right mind Curly would have been properly frightened. But now he thought only of Mac lying there so still in the sand. Right into the fire zone he ran, knelt beside his partner and lifted the red-thatched head. A little hole showed back of the left ear and another at the right temple. A bullet had plowed through the boy's skull.

Softly Flandrau put the head back in the sand and rose to his feet. The revolver of the dead puncher was in his hand. The riders were closing in on him. The nearest called to him to surrender. Almost at the same time a red-hot pain shot through the left arm of the trapped rustler. Someone had nipped him from the rear.

Curly saw red. Surrender nothing! He would go down fighting. As fast as he could blaze he emptied Mac's gun. When the smoke cleared the man who had ordered him to give up was slipping from his horse. Curly was surprised, but he knew he must have hit him by chance.

"We got him. His gun's empty," someone shouted.

Cautiously they closed in, keeping him covered all the time. Of a sudden the plain tilted up to meet the sky. Flandrau felt himself swaying on his feet. Everything went black. The boy had fainted.

When he came to himself strange faces were all around him and there were no bodies to go with them. They seemed to float about in an odd, casual sort of way. Then things cleared.

"He's coming to all right," one said. "How is Cullison?"

This was said to another who had just come up.

"Hard hit. Looks about all in. Got him in the side."

The rage died out of Curly. In a flash he saw all that had come of this drunken spree: the rustling of the Bar Double M stock, the discovery, the death of his friend and maybe of Cullison, the certain punishment that would follow. He was a horse thief caught almost in the act. Perhaps he was a murderer, too. And the whole thing had been entirely unpremeditated.

"You've played h—," one of the men told the boy.

He was a sawed-off little fellow known as Dutch. Flandrau had seen him in the Map of Texas country a year or two before. The rest were strangers to the boy. All of them looked at him out of hard, hostile eyes. He was scarcely a human being to them; rather a wolf to be stamped out of existence as soon as it was convenient.

At a shift in the group Flandrau's eyes fell on his friend lying in the sand with face turned whitely to the sky he never would see again. A lump came into the boy's throat and he had to work it down before he spoke.

"He's only a kid!"

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Woman's Ideas.

"A piano is no good unless it has tone."

"Hub—rather is a bean."—Florida Times-Union.

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Their Practice.

"The group I was with in the attack brought down a man with every shot."

"Then I bet they were a party of amateur hunters."

A distinguished scientist estimates the mean annual rainfall for the entire surface of the earth at about 36 inches.

BACK ACHING?

That "back" is probably due to weak kidneys, a trouble that often follows grip, cold, or overwork. It shows in constant, dull, throbbing backache, or sharp twinges when stooping or lifting. You have headaches, too, dizzy spells, a tired, nervous feeling and irregular kidney action. Don't neglect it. Use Doan's Kidney Pills. Thousands have saved themselves serious kidney ills by timely use of Doan's. Ask your neighbor!

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